An Old House
in Hyde County
Article by Susan Hardcastle and Jack Tankard

One fine spring day, Roy Armstrong, Jack Tankard, and I drove to Hyde County to do a story on a very old home, which is being restored by its present owners, the Mayos.

The breeze was blowing and the hot sun was shining when we drove into the front yard and parked the car under one of several graceful old pecan trees. It was so quiet and peaceful—a charming old homeplace surrounded by pecan trees, swings hanging from their limbs. The yard was a perfect setting for an old fashioned picnic.

Elaine Mayo graciously invited us in to share the history of her home with us. She and her husband, Gary, became interested in the house eight years ago. They were looking for an old home to renovate and were delighted with their find: a house built about 1790, with a large yard.

Interested in the history of the property, Elaine corresponded with a former owner, Mr. Walton Noble. Mr. Noble’s response follows:

September 17, 1973

Mr. Gary Mayo
Swan Quarter
North Carolina 27885

Dear Mr. Mayo:
It was indeed a pleasure to receive your letter of August 23rd, concerning the old Noble home in Scranton.

Before I get into the details of some of the history connected with this old home I'd like to tell you that I am personally pleased that the property is now in the hands of someone who has an appreciation for some of the heritage that our fore-fathers left to us.

First of all, the home was probably built in approximately 1790 to 1810. The reason I say this is that you will notice on the third floor that the beams are put together with pegs and the nails are all hand made nails; also the bricks in the chimney were obviously hand fired and very probably with skilled slave labor.

Originally, the house was approximately 20 feet taller but in 1933 my Father, William Everett Noble, removed a portion of the third floor and modernized the house. History and legend have a way of being glamorized as the years pass, but notice the stained area on the floor, on the third floor, and since I was a child it was told that this was caused from the blood of slaves who were chained to the walls and I do know that over the years my Mother and the Negro help would clean that area but the stains would never come off. A good source of information for you would be the Court House at Swan Quarter which of course would have the chain of title on that property. In the 1930's my Mother, Mrs. Ina Leona Bishop Noble, named our place Sunset Farms and it did go by that name for many years.

Something else that I don't know for a fact but I think you could possibly, easily, verify; I understand that a sea captain arrived in the Scranton area on a sailing ship from England and dismantled his ship and used the timbers for the beams in that house. I would think if you would cut off a small sliver off one of the beams you could then tell if that wood was indigenous to the coastal North Carolina area.

The six larger pecan trees planted in the front yard were planted in about 1915.

The family grave yard holds the remains of my oldest brother and I understand several Negroes that died on the farm are also buried in that cemetery.

There is a possibility that I have pictures of the home before it was remodeled in 1933 and if I can possibly find them I will send them to you.

I wish you and your wife great success and many happy days as I have spent on that land.

With kind personal regards, I remain,

Sincerely,

Walton B. Noble
New Orleans, La.

How long have you lived in the house?
We've lived here eight years.

How old is the house?

It was built some time between 1790 and 1810.

Who built it? Do you know?

Well, it says in that letter and everybody has always told us that a sea captain came into the area, dismantled his ship, and built the house.

So he built the house out of the wood from the dismantled ship?

Well, not completely, but he started it out of the ship.

Do you know who the captain was?

No, I don't. I had intended to get to the courthouse to really trace down his name before you all came, and I never did. We have never found anybody that really did know his name.

But you are pretty sure that the house was built at least partially out of the materials from his ship?

We had a man that was doing a lot of research in Hyde County come up here and look. He crawled up under the house and he definitely said so.

Mrs. Mayo told us that little of the original house remains below the attic due to several refurbishings of the home. The paneling, floors, ceilings of the original are gone. The siding is now vinyl, not wood. However, the floor plan is true to earlier times.

We didn't change any of the rooms.

It looks like some of those windows are pretty old.

They were all here when we bought the house. I don't know that they were the original windows, but we didn't replace any of the windows.

So the windows, if not original, are pretty old?

Yes, they have the four little panes at the top and the solid glass at the bottom. But the stairway was pegged in, and the third story, it is just like it was. You can see a lot of things just like they were.

We noticed that, unlike most of the very old homes of the area, the hallway did not run from the front to the back of the house, with the rooms off either side. We asked Mrs. Mayo about this.

Well, the archeologist told us that it looked like the house had been majorly remodelled at least three times before we remodelled it, so he said you couldn't tell a whole lot about how it might have been.

You have been in it eight years. How did it look when you bought it?

It had that beaded ceiling; there is some upstairs. It also had something like a thick wallpaper—it was much thicker than wallpaper—with beaded ceiling under that.
How about the basic structure? Is this the original foundation?

Yes. I remember when we tore out the wall, that corner has a beam that has been hewn out from the top of the house to the bottom.

One beam?

Yes. And the house was originally three stories. And there are some Roman numerals in the attic. When we had all the walls torn out and you could really see, people were really amazed—like a lot of the corners are not straight, but it's because they are hand hewn.

Is that right?

Yes, and they ran all the way up the house.

This letter talks about a fireplace?

We took that out. It was really a chimney in the middle of the house, but you could walk right over and take a brick right out because the mortar was so bad. It was really dangerous. We just took the chimney out and later put another one in.

I'll bet that was a job, taking the chimney out?

It really was.

Isn't there some blood in the attic?

They say there is; they even say that in the letter. But I haven't seen any. It's so dirty up there.
Could stains on attic board be human blood?

Hole in attic floor where original chimney was
Is it as big as the downstairs? Are you going to use it?

We are going to eventually remodel it. The second story is fixed, but the third story [attic] is not fixed yet.

It would be really something if you could preserve it.

Well, when we bought the house, we bought it for the location. My husband was in carpentry work then, and we also bought it for the space. It was so spacious, and we knew we could come in and remodel it. We bought it five years before we moved up here. Then people weren't really preserving things, and we remodelled instead. Then people just weren't preserving things. Probably we should have tried to preserve a lot of it, but we just didn't.

Did you buy the house from the Nobles?

No, a farmer had bought it from them for the farm land, and we bought just the house and the lot from him.

Was the house unoccupied for any length of time?

Quite a while. The shrubbery was almost as high as the second story. You could see the house, but only because it was so tall. We did a lot of work in the yard. The roof had wooden shingles on it when we bought it. You could go up to the third story and see out through the shingles, but it didn't leak when it rained. I guess they would swell up when it rained, but you could see light at times. We tore off all the roof shingles; that was the very first thing we did. My husband did that all my himself.

Originally, Mrs. Mayo told us, the house was a full three stories. But at some point the roof was lowered by 20 feet.

The house is so tall, I can't imagine it with three stories.

I can't either, but there is a neighbor down the road that remembers the day they took the roof off the house. He is old himself, and he remembers the day they took down part of it. They had gotten scared of storms; the house would sway in the wind.

About when would that have been?

In 1933.

Jack mentioned something about blood on the floor of the attic. What are the legends about this house?

Everybody around here is scared to death of this house. There was supposedly colored slaves chained in the third story if they didn't do right, and I suppose they beat them up there. The colored people in this area don't dare come around here.

Is that right? Because of that story?

Yes.

What about the blood? Is that supposedly from the slaves?

Yes, supposedly.
Did you ever see any evidence of that—chains or anything?

No. The house had been unoccupied, and what was left in here—people had just come in and helped themselves to it. Nothing really was left except a few old bottles, and that is about it.

Are there any other ghost stories?

Not that I know of, but a lot of people that I just wouldn't have imagined tell me that they honestly believe that the house is haunted. I don't think it's haunted, and it don't bother me a bit, but about two years ago we were at a New Year's party and a man from Swan Quarter told me, "You couldn't give me that house of yours." His family rented it when he was little, and so many strange things happened in this house. We hear noises, but houses make noises.

If you wuld like to look upstairs, go right ahead.

Mrs. Mayo led us up the stairs to the attic, the original part of the house.

I can tell that the house is still settling a little bit. All the corners are sinking, and the floors are uneven. It's not that bad yet, and there is nothing we could do. Out back there is a cistern, but we had to do away with it. It was under the original screened in back porch, and we hated to do away with it.

Is the stairway in its original place?

I have had older people tell me that this stairway was not where it is now, but we didn't move it. We intended to maybe change the stairway because, as you can see, the steps are so steep, but you can't hardly find anyone to do that kind of work. All the rooms are a good size and people find it hard to believe that this is only a two bedroom house. You can tell how worn the steps are, and you can tell that there was a banister there.

It was exposed to the second floor?

Yes. I would love for it to be that way again.

Oh, wouldn't it be pretty? You could really make a nice room up here in the attic.

See those wide boards over there.

They are a good 14 or 15 inches. Look at the width of these boards!

They have different widths.

This work around the windows is old stuff?

We didn't do any work up here but put in insulation, and you can see when he [Mr. Mayo] took the old shingles down and put up new shingles.

But these pieces are original? These cross pieces up here?

These cross pieces up here have Roman numerals carved into the beams.

This brought to mind an earlier Life on the Pamlico story about early building methods. Using a knife or axe, builders
Bannister on attic steps

View of reconstructed attic
would notch beams with Roman numerals for proper placement. See "Keeping Records with Numerals, Symbols, and Drawings," Spring, 1983.

Oh, yes, that's great! Number VII, we can read that one!

Gary's father did most of the work, and he was really fascinated with the Roman numerals and the way they had done things.

That is really interesting.

Over here by the stairway you can see the wooden pegs. It was the same way down stairs, but we tore it all out.

Gary was telling me about one part of the house where it was put together without any nails or anything, and it took a whole day to put it together.

Yes, I think you are talking about the corners.

This is the original stairway as far as you know?

As far as I know.

Well, these pegs, and the cross pieces would fit in with the holes in the beams.

The stairway down stairs was just about like this.

These Roman numerals are just about the most interesting thing I have seen since doing any of these stories. That is a literal, tangible example of the way houses were built way back when. Do you know why
they used the Roman numerals? According to an article we did earlier, they got them off the clocks. Those were the numbers they knew. And they were much easier to make with a knife or an axe, or a hatchet.

There are an eight and a twelve.

Roman numerals notched nearly 200 years ago
They might not originally have been where they are now. This house was 20 feet taller than it is now.

That is really hard to believe, isn't it?

Remember, this was not the attic. This was the third floor. We have covered up most of the hand-hewn beams. There are a lot of really old houses in this area. This is one of the really plain houses. Lots of them around here are very ornate, but they are not quite as old as this one.

Originally this was the third story, and there was an attic above us.

These were the beams to the ceiling because these notches would have fit like this.

Yes, they lowered the roof because of the really bad storms they were having in the area at that time. The house would really sway when the wind was blowing. We really like the idea that a sea captain built the house because we both really love the water. And this house is always pretty cool; the breeze is usually blowing in like this all the time.

Feel this breeze? Isn't it wonderful!

As we drove away, we all commented on the serenity of the surroundings and the beauty of the area. Privately we were all speculating on different aspects of the interview. Jack was still wondering if that was really blood on the attic floor. Roy was visualizing the construction of the house--
using numbered notches and pegs. And I was wondering what stories those old walls could tell me.

Jack and Susan with Mrs. Mayo on the porch of her fine old home